

## CHAPTER 15

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### MEDITERRANEAN ADVENTURE

So much for the manifold and variegated experiences of our Nursing Services on the Continent of Africa. We pass now to a brief review of their activities on the northern coast of the Mediterranean and some of the islands adjoining.

Let us deal first with the unhappy history of British intervention in Greece in the early part of 1941.

The German High Command, impressed by the ignominious failure of their Italian allies not only against General Wavell in Libya but against the Greeks in Albania, had decided to intervene in the Mediterranean theatre on their own account. The Greeks, realizing that however successfully they might hold Italians in check they were in no position to withstand an all-out German *blitzkrieg*, appealed to Britain for aid.

The British Government had a hard decision to make. No troops could be spared from Britain itself, where the threat of invasion still loomed large and the training and equipment of the new divisions was in any case far from complete. The only army in being was the Army of the Nile, at present recovering from its tremendous exertions against the Italians, and doing its best to repair and replace the losses in armour and equipment inevitable in a campaign stretched over 500 miles of desert.

Were these troops to be allowed, after due recuperation, to complete their triumphant desert victory, or be diverted, in part at any rate, to the assistance of Greece?

Plainly the troops available for the purpose could not constitute much more than a token force in the face of German Panzer divisions and overwhelming infantry strength. Worse still, we

would be unable to afford adequate fighter protection to these troops against enemy bombing.

The whole problem, needless to say, aroused considerable controversy, but the British War Cabinet adhered to their decision, and the Expeditionary Force was dispatched.

It was accompanied,—preceded, in fact—by a British medical unit from Palestine, which arrived in Athens in the middle of November 1940, having been dispatched thither to aid in nursing Greek troops wounded in fighting against the Italian and Balkan armies.

Their reception was embarrassingly enthusiastic; they were clapped and cheered in the streets, patted on the back, and presented with flowers.

Presently they were enabled to settle down in their hospital at Kephissia, a quite considerable establishment.

The hospital [reports the Matron] consisted of a private house for offices, the Apherdis Hotel for Medical Cases, the Cecil Hotel for Surgical Cases, and the Olympus for Reception, M.I. room, dental, ear and eye department. The two top floors were used as a special treatment centre.

This was the primary arrangement, but with the advent of the wounded Greeks, and later the rush of our own wounded, other arrangements had to be made.

The nursing staff were housed in three private hotels. We were really very comfortable, except in the early days, when we were entirely without heat of any kind and the weather was bitterly cold.

The hospital opened on November 26th, 1940, with accommodation for 110 patients. The beds were not all occupied at first, and there were opportunities for social relaxation. The Matron enjoyed the distinction of being the only lady guest at a reception arranged in honour of the King of Greece, the Crown Prince, and the Prime Minister General Metaxas. The Medical Faculty of the University of Athens also gave a dinner in honour of the unit.

But after the British troops arrived and began to take part in the battle there was little time for such agreeable exchanges. The number of patients in the hospital increased steadily, and by the beginning of April 1941 600 beds were occupied; and as the German attack developed and intensified, the casualty list mounted day by day.

The day after hostilities commenced we had 709 patients. In the course of time we had them lying everywhere—on mattresses on the floor, on stretchers, and in any odd corner.

It soon became obvious that the combined British and Greek strength was totally inadequate to cope with the German invasion. Despite the stubborn gallantry of our troops, it was a losing battle from the start, and the end could only be a matter of time. In one single day 300 British soldiers were received into the hospital and 400 evacuated to a hospital ship. The hospital orderlies, we are told 'were marvellous', carrying on through continuous periods of stretcher-bearing with the shortest of breaks. But the end was at hand.

On April 21st I received a message that 25 Sisters were to be ready for evacuation. The following day I was awakened at 3 a.m. All the Sisters were to be ready for evacuation, hand luggage only.

The situation was evidently deteriorating rapidly, as was indicated by the number of orders and counter-orders issued at this time. The main difficulty was to find accommodation for the Sisters in the crowded ships, and at the same time to get them on board without danger to themselves, for the ships were under constant bombing.

On April 23rd there was a message to say that all the Sisters were to stay in Kephissia. Another message at 3.45 p.m. said that there were a few seats available in a ship, if any Sister wished to leave. Eight Sisters left in an hour.

On April 24th the D.D.M.S. told me that it was considered wiser for us to remain, rather than risk a getaway. . . . There were air-raids all day. . . . A certain number of walking cases were discharged at intervals: many of these returned to us several times before they finally got away.

How real the danger was is indicated in the following passage:

About 2 p.m. the Commanding Officer and Registrar left, and a number of walking cases left too, to travel in the same ship. At 7 p.m. we received a message that the ship had been hit, and that the C.O. was among the casualties. She had received three direct hits and was ablaze immediately.

It was really pathetic to see the lads we had discharged a few hours previously returning to us with fresh wounds. Their spirit was magnificent. The C.O., mercifully, only had a large scalp-wound, and he started off the same night.

By this time the situation was such that the Sisters in the hospital seemed to have no alternative left but to stay where they were and be taken prisoner. But deliverance was at hand, almost at the eleventh hour.

On the morning of April 25th the D.D.M.S. rang up to say that a destroyer might be laid on for us later in the day, and that I was to confine the Sisters to barracks, with a view to laying hands on them at short notice. In the evening a further message informed us that we were to be ready to start in three-quarters of an hour. Some Greek nurses had kindly volunteered to take over the nursing in the hospital.

The party set off in lorries at 7 p.m., pausing to pick up forty Sisters from the Australian Hospital. The journey occupied five hours, in complete darkness and over unspeakable roads. Finally they reached the port of embarkation, a small jetty projecting into the sea. The promised destroyer had not materialized, but a ship of sorts was available, and in her they contrived to cross

to Crete at 5.30 p.m., fortunately with only one casualty (a ship's officer). Here they found the eight Sisters who had preceded them on the previous day.

They were kept in Crete for only two-and-a-half days, and were then evacuated in comparative peace, except for two bombing raids and an uncomfortable E-boat scare during the hours of night.

I am glad to have this opportunity of telling you how well the Sisters worked. Their behaviour, especially on the boat to Crete, where the noise was indescribable, was beyond praise.

It certainly must have been, and the report gives us but an average picture of the courage and endurance of all the Nursing Sisters concerned in this nightmare adventure.

So ended our Grecian crusade. The effort had cost us dear, both in Greece and Crete, but the account was not altogether on the debit side. Had it not been made, Hitler might have penetrated unopposed through Palestine and Syria to India and the East.

The attempt to save Greece [adds General Wavell], though unsuccessful, undoubtedly frustrated the plan for future enemy operations, by destroying so large a proportion of his airborne troops. The total enemy losses were at least 12,000-15,000.

The defence saved, in all probability, Cyprus, Syria, Iraq, and perhaps Tobruk.

## II

Tucked away in the north-east corner of the Mediterranean lies the island of Cyprus, forty miles from Asia Minor and sixty from the coast of Syria—a position admirably adapted to the strategic needs of the Allies in these waters.

The island is a large one, with an area of some 3,500 square miles. It is a comparatively recent acquisition to the British Empire, and owes its place therein to the foresight and initiative of a British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, who, having in 1878 purchased for the sum of four million pounds a controlling interest in the newly opened Suez Canal, leased the island from the Turkish Government as a convenient base from which to guard the approaches thereto. At the outbreak of the First World War, when Turkey joined the Axis powers against us, Cyprus was automatically annexed to Britain, and in 1925 became a Crown Colony.

In consequence, when the Second World War broke out in 1939, and Hitler occupied Greece and Crete eighteen months later, we were in possession of a valuable barrier against enemy penetration into Palestine and the oilfields of Iraq. A strong military garrison was installed there, accompanied by the usual medical services.

The population was mainly Greek and Moslem, and the languages spoken were Turkish and Modern Greek. Most of the educated classes spoke English, a distinct boon to Nursing Sisters struggling with the routine difficulties of hospital organization amid strange surroundings and unfamiliar tongues.

The heat in the plains, where the troops were first quartered, was very great, and the health of the men suffered considerably. Matters were aggravated by an almost complete lack of sanitation. In due course, however, new and healthier quarters were established in the hills, while a campaign of sanitary reform, which would have earned the warm approval of Florence Nightingale, gradually reduced the death-rate to average level.

Cyprus, more fortunate than Malta and Greece, was practically free from major enemy operations throughout the war, and the energies of the Q.A.I.M.N.S. representatives could in consequence be concentrated on the building up of an adequate nursing service.

The task was by no means easy, and the personnel of No. 23 Scottish General Hospital, which arrived in late 1940, had plenty to occupy them.

They began in a small way, with a staff comprising an Assistant Matron and four Nursing Sisters. Their first hospital was a large private house, recently the Italian Embassy. The Sisters were billeted in a hotel close by. They had some thirty-six patients, half a dozen of whom were Cypriots.

With the coming of spring and the arrival of additional troops the nursing establishment was considerably increased.

Our first real war casualties [writes one of the Sisters] were Naval ratings from a destroyer which had been bombed off the coast. Road accidents became more numerous, and we had occasional air-raid casualties.

The arrival of a field ambulance unit relieved the situation, and they started work at various centres. One company opened up a small hospital at the Hill Station, and we took it in turn to go up there, and thus got a change from the intense heat of the plains.

The orderlies had been well trained in field dressings and as stretcher-bearers, but were inexperienced in ward work; but they were all very keen and most enthusiastic.

Down in the plains, however, matters were growing serious. Dysentery had broken out among the troops, and for lack of proper equipment tents and even outhouses had to be used as wards. The average number of patients in the island hospitals had now grown to 100, including some ten to fifteen officers.

The work was obviously growing beyond the capacity of an Assistant Matron and four Nursing Sisters. In April 1942 the situation was materially eased by the arrival of sixteen Sisters and an Assistant Matron from Egypt. The Matron had arrived a few weeks earlier. It was decided to close down the existing military hospital and erect a new one of a more modern type on a more suitable site. This was to consist of 400 beds, of which 200 were for Indians.

The Hospital [reports the Matron] was built on the semi-dispersal plan and consisted of stone huts, capable of taking

twenty-five beds at each end, with a Sister's duty-room, dressing-room, ward-kitchen and linen-room in the middle. The wards were very wide and had plenty of windows, but unfortunately there was no glass in the island. Eventually we managed to have fly-netting fixed in, but this did not prevent great discomfort when a dust-storm was blowing.

As the wards of the new hospital were completed the Sisters took them over, having first successfully evicted an Indian casualty clearing station which had somehow got possession.

Needless to say, the usual delays and difficulties inevitable in the setting-up of a new hospital in an out-of-the-way island had to be faced and overcome.

We were rather held up for want of medical equipment, which had to come from Egypt. We could not open the operating theatre, as we had no table, autoclave, or trolleys. We eventually borrowed these from the C.C.S., and the Red Cross gave us a case of instruments. On this equipment we managed to carry on quite well until our own arrived. The Red Cross were always helpful, but they had very little stock, for all of which they depended on Egypt, and shipping was not too plentiful.

Indeed it was not, for at this period enemy submarine and bombing activity was at its height throughout the Mediterranean. Convoys to Malta were being decimated, while in the summer of 1942 the *Ark Royal* and *Barham* had recently been sunk and the *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth* lay stranded in Alexandria Harbour, disabled by limpet bombs.

Towards the end of May a convalescent hospital was opened in the hills, and this was staffed partly from our hospital. It was a great boon to the patients, and also gave all Sisters and R.A.M.C. personnel in turn an opportunity of getting out of the heat.



The flies were a perpetual pest, and until we got the fly-netting the wards were black with them. Our cases were nearly all medical—malaria, dysentery, and lung conditions.

On June 3rd we moved into our own Mess. The Sisters were most appreciative of the fact that each had a room to herself. We got some old mosquito nets, cut them up, and the contractor fixed these into the window-frames. We were now fly-proof and mosquito-proof, but not, alas, dust-proof.

In our Mess we had an R.A.M.C. cook and four Cypriot maids; we had found it impossible to get a Cypriot cook at anything like the pay allowed. The maids were excellent workers, and three of them lived in.

It was difficult to buy anything on the island and though we had an officers' shop in one of the towns, uniform was seldom available. It took nearly two months to get anything from Egypt.

From the above clear and dispassionate narrative the reader will gain an interesting and rather unusual picture of the administrative side of Army nursing on active service. In most cases the narrative has inevitably been interrupted and obscured by operational details: here, in the comparative tranquillity of an unbeleaguered island, the domestic pattern has an opportunity to emerge.

But if the dangers were less than usual, discomfort and worry were not. The climate, the flies, the perpetual strain of nursing, the shortage of supplies of every kind, above all a sense of remoteness and isolation from the outer world—these had all to be reckoned with.

Nevertheless, life was never dull, and recreation and small excitements were not lacking. The climate in spring was delightful, and cycling, tennis, and walking were available for all. Sea-bathing was a special delight, especially to Sisters who had come from other and sterner periods of service elsewhere.

There was also the great occasion upon which His Excellency the Governor formally inspected the completed hospital, and the

occasion, greater still, when H.R.H. the Duke of Gloucester visited the island, and Matron represented the Sisters at an official reception given in his honour.

## III

Our three principal strongholds in the Mediterranean in 1941 (apart from those of the North African littoral) were Gibraltar, Malta, and Cyprus.

Gibraltar, the key to the Mediterranean, was never seriously attacked; for that we were indebted to General Franco and his dogged determination to keep Spain out of the war at any price; otherwise Hitler would undoubtedly have made Gibraltar, and after Gibraltar Algeria and Tunisia, one of his major objectives.

But Malta was in a very different case: its possession was an almost indispensable adjunct to the command of the Western Mediterranean. That fact had been fully borne out by its history. Throughout the centuries the island had been occupied and employed as a naval base, in turn, by the Phœnicians, Carthage, Rome, Arab pirates, and the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. Napoleon took it in his stride in 1798, on his way out to Egypt and thereafter to the Battle of the Pyramids and the destruction of his fleet by Nelson in Aboukir Bay.

The British expelled the French from Malta two years later, and remained there ever after, at the express request of the Maltese people. Upon the face of a tablet over the Main Guard Room, opposite the Palace of Valetta, a Latin inscription was set up, cut deep and bearing the date A.D. 1814:

*The Love of the Maltese People [it runs] and the Voice of Europe, Have for Ever Entrusted the Guardianship of These Islands to Great Britain, the Unconquered.*

In 1940 that trusteeship was to be put to a test unknown even in the stormy history of Mediterranean warfare.

Malta lies some sixty miles south of Sicily, and is about the same size as the Isle of Wight. It possesses a magnificent deep-water harbour at Valetta, and in normal times is the headquarters of our Mediterranean Fleet.

Obviously, here was a prize of inestimable value to an enterprising enemy. But although Mussolini declared war on the British Empire in June 1940, he made no direct attempt to occupy this vitally important base and stronghold, lying only sixty miles away. He contented himself with futile air-raids, on no particularly heavy scale, and the dropping of incendiaries. It was not until December 1941 that matters became serious, for now Germany took over. Hitler had invaded Russia that summer, and now that the Russian winter had brought the campaign to a temporary standstill his heavy bombers, particularly his dive-bombers, were available against the Maltese.

Fortunately full preparation had been made for these visitations. Malta is composed mainly of limestone rock of a type so soft that it is not difficult to cut it with a knife; and this rendered it possible to construct subterranean shelters on a most elaborate scale, to which the civil population could betake themselves in time of need. By the end of the siege the greater part of Malta, especially round the Grand Harbour, lay in ruins, but the Maltese were for the most part safely housed underground.

As a result of these measures the civilian casualties during the devastating months which followed, considering the density of the island's population, were surprisingly small. Indeed the great majority of them were incurred in that first German raid in December 1941. In all 1,493 civilians were killed. The actual population was about 307,000, or 2,500 to the square mile. Those most exposed to danger were the troops defending the island, and the dockyard workers in the Grand Harbour.

The Military Hospital, a permanent institution regularly employed in peace-time, stood on top of a bare and rocky plateau overlooking an aerodrome. In such a small island it was quite impossible to site all the hospitals in positions out of range of military targets, and the Military Hospital suffered accordingly. The aerodrome was bombed regularly day and night.

The enemy [we are told by one of the Sisters] appeared regularly at 7 a.m., at midday, and at 6 p.m. The first raid we watched as we were scrambling to get dressed for breakfast; during the second you were either in the theatre or the mess, according to whether you went to first or second lunch; the third raid, at 6.0, served as an accompaniment for tea.

Before the Spitfires came<sup>1</sup> the Messerschmidts used to play hide-and-seek up and down the blocks of the Barrack Hospital, and machine-gun bullets used to fly.

As an emergency measure a small underground theatre was hewn out of the rock, and here operations could be performed if the situation overhead became too hot. It possessed only one water-tap, but was otherwise as fully equipped as any other theatre. It was not often found necessary to use it, which was just as well, for during night raids the electric current invariably failed, and work had to be carried on by the light of torches and hurricane lamps.

The main handicap of the medical services in Malta was shortage of supplies, for everything had to be transported by sea, and the island was so thoroughly blockaded by submarine and bombing activity that it was only at rare intervals that a convoy got through, and then only as a fraction of its original self. And the shortage was not confined to medical supplies. Everything—food, fuel, ammunition, and military stores had to be strictly rationed, and by the end of the siege the situation was precarious in the extreme, as we can gather from the following characteristically restrained statement:

Of course we were a bit hungry at times, and it was a bit unfunny when it came to counting out the slices of bread for breakfast and tea. But we had a little more to eat than

<sup>1</sup> The Spitfires, incidentally, were a long time in arriving, for their short flight-range made it necessary to ship them in an aircraft-carrier; and it was not until May 1942 that the first contingent arrived. Their intervention reversed the air-situation almost entirely.

the civil population, which really did starve—one tin of bully beef per family per fortnight, and nine ounces of bread per day.

Supplies of almost everything needed in a busy theatre were woefully short. We were rationed to one pint of spirit per week and one gallon of Dettol per month. Test-tubes, rubber gloves, catgut, certain drugs, quick-drying plaster bandages and X-ray films were all rationed monthly. We used to do minor operations without wearing gloves, in an effort to conserve our dwindling stocks.

Needless to say, the Sisters had their ration of casualties too.

Almost the last raid we had was when the Sisters' Mess was straddled and hit at 5.0 a.m. No one was killed, but two Sisters were badly injured, and we had to dig a couple more from under the debris.

Amid all the wreckage and mess a printed motto still hung, though a little askew, on the wall of Matron's damaged bedroom, triumphantly claiming—*Don't worry; it may not happen!*

On another part of the island a General Hospital was destroyed by direct hits. The Sisters incurred some considerable shock, but were uninjured. Some of the R.A.M.C. personnel received fatal injuries.

Still, as all the world knows, Malta weathered the storm, and had the unique distinction, conferred by the King upon the island as a whole, of the George Cross, formally and publicly presented to the Lord Chief Justice of the island by Lord Gort, V.C., Governor and Commander-in-Chief.

Here is one Sister's final comment upon the record of Q.A.I.M.N.S. in Malta:

I must emphasize that not one of us thought at any time

that we underwent hardships and difficulties greater than those experienced by other Sisters on active service elsewhere.

Nevertheless, a full share in the glory of the George Cross was theirs alone.

